

Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Thursday 20th March 2025, 18:30 to 19:45

Minutes

Present

MSPs

- John Mason MSP
- Murdo Fraser MSP

Non-MSP Members

- Ephraim Borowski
- Nicola Livingston
- Craig Horne
- Malcolm Macleod
- Oliver Lane
- Rev Bonnie Evans Hills
- Daryl Watson
- James Fraser
- David Marsh
- David Cavanagh
- Alan Meldrum
- Carole Shaw

Apologies

- Jeremy Balfour MSP
- Stephen Kerr MSP
- Michael Veitch
- Ravinder Karr Nijjar
- Lorraine McMahon
- Brian Miller

Agenda

1. Approval of Previous Minutes

The minutes from the previous meeting 11th November 2024 and the AGM on 25th November 2024 were approved without issue. Both proposed by Murdo Fraser MSP & seconded by John Mason MSP.

2. Matters Arising

Interfaith Scotland Update

Recognition was given to Interfaith Scotland for their previous and ongoing support particularly Maureen Sier & Jamie Spurway. Due to shifting priorities, the board has decided to step back from the Cross Party Group, leaving the secretariat role open for suggestions.

Response from the Russian Embassy

Following a previous meeting with John Kinahan, a letter was sent to the Russian Embassy addressing issues of freedom of religion and related abuses in Russia & occupied Ukraine. For the first time, a lengthy response was received; members may request a copy if needed.

3. Main Presentation by John Kinahan

Detailed analysis of human rights and religious freedom violations in Central Asia. Comparisons were made with trends in Russia and other ex-Soviet states.

State Control & Censorship: Central Asian regimes (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) exercise strict state control over religious communities. Measures include banning independent mosques, regulating religious texts (e.g., restrictions on the Bible, Quran, and icons), and censoring religious literature.

Repressive Measures: Severe actions such as arbitrary fines, detention (with reports of torture), and forced compliance with onerous state registration requirements were highlighted. New laws impose high thresholds for community founders and mandate compulsory re-registration every five years, effectively limiting free practice.

Impact on Religious Communities: These policies restrict not only worship and religious education but also hamper charitable activities and open dialogue about human rights. Overall, the measures serve to stifle dissent and reinforce authoritarian control.

4. Overview of Repressive Actions & Specific Incidents

Shortly after a raid, a Catholic Apostolic administration was threatened with liquidation if further “violations” occurred. Key officials (including deputy directors and police) issued warnings against the Church without providing clear justification —citing terrorism as a pretext.

Tajikistan (July 26, 2022): A 15-year-old critic, Muzaffar Daglak Miaov, was arrested during an anti-terror operation and later sentenced to five years in prison. Other critics and local informal leaders have similarly faced arrest, detention, and extrajudicial violence.

Decrees and Torture (May 2023): A decree signed by President Rahman imposed measures that prevented families from burying relatives as they wished. In one case, NSC secret police tortured a protester’s relative over a dispute concerning a gravestone.

A Russian “wanted list” reportedly includes over 105,000 names, many being human rights defenders from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Across Central Asia, regimes employ widespread measures including arbitrary arrests, forced beard shaving at mosque raids, fines for “illegal” religious education, and extensive surveillance of religious gatherings. These actions are designed to suppress independent religious expression and enforce state-controlled interpretations of faith.

5. Discussion and Q&A: Practical Steps, Trends, and Advocacy

John Kinahan stressed that advocacy groups and parliamentarians should continue documenting and publicising human rights violations. Organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Radio Free Europe were cited as examples of effective documentation.

Despite worsening repression in the short term, Kinahan noted that such measures can signal regime failure. Drawing on historical examples (e.g., the collapse of Eastern Bloc regimes), he encouraged not to give up hope and underscored the resilience of the human spirit.

The trend in the five Central Asian states is toward increased restrictions, with heavy-handed measures used to control religious practices and dissent. Geopolitical pressures, including those stemming from Russia’s actions in Ukraine, contribute to this entrenched approach.

While the discussion touched on whether countries like Pakistan or Iran have influence, Kinahan’s view was that these states are primarily focused on their own internal control rather than actively intervening in neighbouring religious freedoms.

Participants agreed on the importance of continued advocacy and the potential effectiveness of writing letters to these regimes. Debate also focused on the coordination among Central Asian states, noting that while methods may differ, there is a shared intent to suppress independent religious expression.

6. Closing Remarks

John Mason MSP thanked John Kinahan for his detailed presentation and the participants for their active engagement. The meeting was adjourned with a reminder that follow-up topics and suggestions for future meetings are welcome.